

CHAPTER I

Medieval Contacts between Norway and Iceland

Magnús biskup kom til Íslands um alþingi, ok kom í Eyjafjörð ok reið til þings, ok kom þar þá menn váru at dómum, ok urðu eigi ásáttir um eitthvert mál, en þá kom maðr at dóminum, ok sagði at nú riði Magnús biskup á þingit; en menn urðu svá fegnir þeirri sögu, at þegar gengu allir menn heim. En biskup gekk síðan út á hlaðit fyrir kirkju, ok sagði þá öllum mönnum þau tíðendi, er gjörzt höfðu í Noregi, meðan hann var utan, ok þótti öllum mönnum mikils um vert málsnilli hans ok skörungskap. (*Hungrvaka* in Bps. vol. 1:76–77)

(Bishop Magnús came to Iceland [in 1135] at the time of the *alþingi* and arrived in Eyjafjörður and rode to the Thingmeeting, where the men were gathered at the court and could not settle a particular case, but a man went to the court and said that Bishop Magnús was riding to the Thing; the men were so delighted by this news that they all immediately went home. Then the bishop went out on the pavement before the church and told everyone what had happened in Norway while he was abroad, and everyone was much impressed by his eloquence and intelligence.)

Iceland has, by European standards, a short history, but the Icelanders developed very early an extraordinary interest in, and gift for, writing history, not only their own but that of the neighboring Scandinavian countries as well, especially Norway. According to their own records the settlement of Iceland took place in the period 870–930, and just two centuries later they undertook the project of writing their history back to the time of the settlement.¹ The first extant account is found in a little book by Ari Þorgilsson known as the *Libellus Islandorum*

(or *Íslendingabók* in the native language in which it was written). The preserved version of the book refers to another lost redaction that included genealogies and lives of the (Norwegian) kings.² Ari's booklet is dated to the 1120s (or before 1133: ÍF 1.1:xviii), and it took another century for Icelandic writing to reach its full flowering with the book-length biographies of Norwegian kings and the book-length tales about the Icelandic Saga Age (ca. 930–1050), as well as biographies of Icelandic bishops and translations of Latin and French texts. Much of this material is familiar only to specialists, but the native accounts of the Icelandic Saga Age, which I will refer to as sagas about early Icelanders, have become justly famous because of their literary distinction, and they have an international readership.³

The sagas about Norwegian kings are also remarkable, but they do not have quite the dramatic force or the skill in characterization that set the native sagas apart. They are nonetheless among the most readable of European chronicles. Since they touch on events elsewhere in Scandinavia, they are quite well known to Scandinavian readers, especially in Norway, where they provide a narrative frame for the medieval phase of national history writing. Outside of Scandinavia they are considerably less well known. Until recently two of the major historical compilations, *Morkinskinna* and *Fagrskinna*, had not been translated into English, but they both became available in 2000 and 2004.⁴ As a consequence the early history writing about Norway and some high points in Icelandic literature are now more accessible. It is the object of the present survey to trace the evolution of this material and make the development similarly accessible. Up until now the study of the so-called kings' sagas has been intimidatingly arcane, with a strong emphasis on textual relationships that cannot always be established satisfactorily because there are too many gaps in our information.⁵ The kings' sagas should not, however, be the exclusive property of the philologists; they are also exceptional narratives, and at some point the focus should be shifted away from the scholarly puzzles and toward a more inclusive consideration of literary history.

Before adjusting our perspective in this direction, we must provide some information on the relationship of the Icelanders to the Norwegians and ask how they came into the possession of so much knowledge about Norway. A simple answer is that many of them came originally from Norway and continued through the tenth,

eleventh, and twelfth centuries to have closer ties to Norway than to any other country. This generalization is based in the first instance on a remarkable collection of genealogical information known as the *Book of Settlement* (*Landnámabók*).⁶ It circles the island and records the settlement of 430 men and women. In most cases the origin of these settlers is not specified, but 130 of them are said to have come from Norway, and it may be assumed without too much license that many others were Norwegian as well.⁷

Although the information in the *Book of Settlement* is incomplete, it certainly suggests that the immigration to Iceland was predominantly Norwegian. It is in any case clear that Old Norwegian became the universal language of Iceland.⁸ There is a rare mention of Celtic or German speakers in the sagas, but these languages were not generally spoken or understood.⁹ Norwegian law granted the Icelanders special privileges in Norway, and the Icelandic laws reciprocated.¹⁰ It is also clear that down through the thirteenth century the Icelanders considered themselves to be closely related to the Norwegians, and they prided themselves on a distinguished ancestry in Norway. There is an interesting passage in “Gísli þátrr Illugasonar” suggesting that the Icelanders could consider themselves no less the “thanes” of the king of Norway than the Norwegians themselves.¹¹ Pride of lineage reaches a high point in a little story about Halldórr Snorrason, the son of the distinguished figure Snorri the Chieftain, in the first half of the eleventh century. King Haraldr harðráði (Hardrule) dismisses the commander of one of his ships (“a man of great ancestry”) in order to put Halldórr in his place. The man who has been deprived of his command protests: “It did not cross my mind that you would choose an Icelander and demote me from command.” But the king is quick to defend Halldórr: “His ancestry in Iceland is no worse than yours is in Norway, and not much time has elapsed since those who now live in Iceland were Norwegian themselves.”¹² Whether this incident ever transpired or not, it is unmistakable evidence of Icelandic self-esteem.

In recent years a small literature has grown up around the idea of national identity in Iceland. The question posed is this: When did the Icelanders first begin to think of themselves as such, as an entity quite distinct from the Norwegians, with whom they shared language and ancestry? The discussion was engaged a hundred years ago when Bogi Th. Melsteð assembled a variety of saga passages that showed

quite effectively that the Icelanders viewed themselves as a separate people.¹³ The defect in this evidence is that it dates from a later period in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and may not tell us much about national consciousness in the tenth and eleventh centuries. A recent historian, Sverrir Jakobsson, has suggested that a sense of regional affiliation may have been a more dominant sentiment and that a firm sense of national identity may have set in as late as 1262–64 when Iceland was annexed by the Norwegian crown and the two countries became more conscious of their identities.¹⁴

On the other hand, it is clear from the historical compilation known as *Morkinskinna* (ca. 1220), to which we will advert in the third chapter, that the Icelanders had a rather insistent sense of themselves, especially in contrast to the Norwegians.¹⁵ The only question is how far back in time this competitive streak extended. It would not be unreasonable to suppose that the Icelanders had some feeling of separation and independence as soon as they acquired their own laws and political institutions around 930.

Whatever the bonds were between Iceland and Norway, and whenever they loosened, they would have been maintained by the regular sea traffic that passed between the two countries each summer. The prologue to the *Separate Saga of Saint Olaf* (ca. 1230?) takes special note of the information that would have passed along this route (ÍF 27:422):

In his [Harald Fairhair's] day Iceland was settled, and there was a great deal of travel from Norway to Iceland. News passed between these countries every summer and it was then committed to memory and passed along in the form of stories.

The author of the prologue goes on to say that these stories would have been subject to the vagaries of memory, but that the skaldic stanzas pertaining to them would have been stable provided they were correctly recited.¹⁶

The immigration into Iceland cannot be quantified on the basis of the *Book of Settlement*, but on the shipping that plied the waters between Norway and Iceland after the initial settlement some rough conjectures can be ventured.¹⁷ Half a hundred sagas and shorter narratives about the Saga Age (ca. 930–1050) yield no fewer than

243 mentions of landing sites and harbors around the island, as the appended map (no. 1) shows. The word “harbor” is no doubt an overstatement since there were as yet no proper harbors. As *Egils saga* informs us, any quiet bay or inlet could serve as a landing place (ÍF 2:97):

It happened, while Þórólfr had been abroad and while Skalla-Grímr was living at Borg, that one summer a merchant ship from Norway arrived in Borgarfjörðr; at that time it was the general practice to draw merchant ships up in rivers or mouths of inlets or little bays.

At first the ships from Norway would have transported settlers, and, as we will see further along, there could have been some later settlers. When the settlement was complete, however, most of the traffic would have been commercial. Norwegian merchants, who are frequently mentioned in the sagas, would have arrived in the summer, concluded trade agreements, and overwintered in Icelandic homes.¹⁸ As Iceland grew more populous, trade presumably became regularized. Map 2 at the end of this chapter shows that in the thirteenth century, judging by the evidence of *Sturlunga saga*, the number of landing sites was radically reduced while there was a very substantial growth in the importance of the main harbors in the north (Gásir), the west (Hvítá), and the southwest (Eyrar). The evidence assembled below shows that these harbors had in the meantime become major markets and magnets for the people in the surrounding areas.

Since the sources of our information are Icelandic, not Norwegian, they tell us a great deal less about landing sites in Norway. The sagas normally state only that a given ship arrived in Norway, without specifying the exact location. If the location is mentioned, it is usually Trondheim, and it is only in the thirteenth century that Bergen acquires parity with Trondheim. What exactly can be deduced from these maritime connections is the subject of what follows.

The frequent mention of landing sites in medieval Iceland is indicative of the travel to and from that nation, but it does not specify the intensity of the circulation between Iceland and Norway. It does not tell us how many ships made the crossing, or how often. Nor does it necessarily tell us anything about the interaction between the crews that landed and the local population. There are nonetheless

indications that the traffic was considerable. Passages in *Kristni saga* and *Hungrvaka* tell us that at a date calculated to be the summer of 1118 thirty-five ships arrived in Iceland.¹⁹ *Hungrvaka* reads as follows:

That summer thirty-five ships came to Iceland, and in the autumn eight went to Norway after Michaelmas [September 29]. In the process the population in Iceland grew so greatly that there was a great food shortage in many districts.

Kristni saga adds that many were shipwrecked or went down at sea so that only eight made it back, with none arriving before Michaelmas.

There are puzzles in these passages. In the first place the people aboard the thirty-five vessels appear not to have been traders but immigrants, since they did not all return, and their numbers seem to have created a food crisis. If there were twenty or twenty-five persons aboard each ship, the influx would have numbered perhaps seven hundred to nine hundred people, with perhaps two hundred on the eight ships that returned. Six or seven hundred new souls could well have strained the food resources if they were concentrated in a particular region.

If thirty-five ships were by any chance an average over three summer months, we could deduce that there was a ship arrival every two or three days, but we are no doubt meant to understand that thirty-five ships were far in excess of the average. There is only one comparable passage. The author of *Eiríks saga rauða* (ÍF 4:202) attributes a statement to Ari Þorgilsson to the effect that in 985 twenty-five ships left from Breiðafjörður and Borgarfjörður for Greenland. Fourteen of them arrived, while the others were driven back or perished. This too was a colonizing fleet and would have been atypical.

There are two other passages that may give us some idea about the population exchange between Iceland and Norway. Bogi Th. Melsteð cited two texts stating that in the days of King Magnús berfœttr (Bareleg) (1093–1103) there were three hundred (= 360) Icelanders in Trondheim.²⁰ The figure is given in connection with a story about the Icelander Gísl Illugason, who kills a Norwegian in King Magnús's retinue and is clapped into irons. The point of the story is that the Icelandic contingent in Trondheim is large enough to mount an

effective opposition to the king and release Gísl from custody long enough to give the future bishop Jón Ógmundarson time to assuage the king's wrath and gain clemency for his countryman. Melsteð warns of the possible exaggeration in the figure of 300 (or 360 in long hundreds), but on the other hand, the writers would not have set the figure so high if it were not believable.

The two texts referred to by Melsteð are Gunnlaugr Leifsson's life of Bishop Jón, which must have been written before Gunnlaugr died in 1218, and a version of the *Saga of Magnús berfœttr*. As Jonna Louis-Jensen indicates, the two texts are scribally connected so that we are not dealing with independent versions.²¹ Melsteð noted that the 300 to 360 Icelanders in Trondheim would have accounted for rather more than ten ships. Since it seems apparent that almost all Icelandic ships before the thirteenth century sailed to Trondheim rather than putting in at a variety of Norwegian ports, ten ships or more at a given moment may not have been an unrepresentative number.

Turning to the outward course, we must also ask how many Norwegians are likely to have visited Iceland. Most of the references to Norwegian shipping involve only trading vessels doing business and then overwintering until the following summer, but there are two telling exceptions to this rule. One is a report from *Prestssaga Guðmundar góða* relating that Ari Þorgeirsson had a following of thirty Norwegians at an assembly meeting in 1164.²² The most striking exception is a passage in *Íslendinga saga* for 1217 recounting that Snorri Sturluson rode to the *alþingi* (Allthing) with a following of 600 (720) men, of which eighty were Norwegians.²³ This was the year before Snorri's first voyage to Norway. The large number of Norwegians can therefore not be attributed to recruiting efforts in Norway.

Whatever the explanation may be, there must have been eighty Norwegians in western Iceland willing to enter the service of an Icelandic chieftain. They would not have been landowners or tenant farmers, and by 1217 it is unlikely that there would have been continuing waves of immigration. They could conceivably have been Norwegian merchants for whom Snorri had procured winter lodging so that at the end of the winter they felt they were enough in his debt to associate themselves with his causes. We will see below that Norwegian winter guests sometimes took part in their hosts'

armed enterprises. To acquire allies from abroad on such a large scale is, however, unexampled and suggests that Snorri must have had a farsighted and well-planned recruitment policy involving special attentiveness to Norwegian visitors as a perhaps previously unexploited resource. Since such a large following at the *alþingi* was effectively viewed as a potential fighting force, we may also ask whether Snorri considered Norwegians to have special military value. We will see that Norwegian merchants were viewed as a good source of weapons and armaments, and they may also have had the reputation of being skilled in the use of such equipment.

The possibility that there were 300 (360) Icelanders in Trondheim in 1118 and that there were eighty Norwegians available for armed service in Iceland in 1217 may be atypical and not close to the average. An alternative approach to the problem would be to consider the frequency with which the Icelanders and Norwegians traveled to each other's countries. We can be reasonably certain that ships passed both ways virtually every summer, although there is a record of one summer when no ships arrived in Iceland (1187).²⁴ On the other hand, there is a high probability that many arrivals and departures went unrecorded.

One type of evidence is the reference to traders who habitually set sail, presumably most every summer. The usual formula is that such and such a man was a “*farmaðr mikill*” (a great seafarer). Thus *Eyrbyggja saga* (ÍF 4:76) recounts that a certain Þóroddr skattkaupandi “was a great seafarer and owned seagoing ships.” *Laxdæla saga* (ÍF 5:70) characterizes Þorleikr Høskuldsson in terms of his long maritime experience: “Þorleikr Høskuldsson had been a great seafarer and spent time with distinguished men when he was on trading ventures before he settled down, and he was regarded as a man of high standing.” In the same saga Helgi Harðbeinsson also has seaman's credentials (ÍF 5:164): “Helgi was a big strong man and a great seafarer.” Similar phrasing can be found in *Gunnlaugs saga* (ÍF 3:106), *Laxdæla saga* (ÍF 5:171), *Gísla saga* (ÍF 6:16), *Fóstbrœðra saga* (ÍF 6:124), “Þorvarðar þátrr krákunefs” (ÍF 6:371), and *Vatnsdæla saga* (ÍF 8:71, 78, 122).

Sometimes the reference to sea traffic is quite general, as in *Laxdæla saga* (ÍF 5:130): “When summer came, ships circulated from country to country.” More often the generality is applied to a particular individual. Thus it is said of Hrafn Qnundarson in *Gunnlaugs saga* (ÍF 3:61): “When he had come of age, he traveled from country to

country and was well thought of wherever he went.” *Bjarnar saga* (ÍF 3:111) echoes *Laxdæla saga* (ÍF 5:171) in referring to Þorkell Eyjólfsson: “Among them is named the distinguished man Þorkell Eyjólfsson, who was married to Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, for at that time Þorkell was engaged in travel and was always highly regarded at King Óláfr’s court when he was abroad.” In *Heiðarvígja saga* (Jón Ólafsson’s transcript) Hallr Guðmundarson is introduced with the words (ÍF 3:251): “Hallr was always engaged in trading ventures; he was intelligent and an excellent fellow.” *Eiríks saga rauða* is still more explicit about a certain Einarr Þorgeirsson (ÍF 4:203): “Einarr was engaged in seafaring from country to country and it served him well; every winter he was always either in Iceland or Norway.” The same saga is somewhat more succinct on Þorfinnr karlsefni (ÍF 4:218): “Þorfinnr was engaged in trading voyages and was thought to be a good seafarer.”

Grettis saga is particularly rich in references to seafarers. Ásmundur hærulangr Þorgrímsson is one example (ÍF 7:34): “He sailed to various countries and became a great and wealthy merchant.” Haflíði at Reyðarfell is another (ÍF 7:48): “He was a seafarer and had a ship in circulation.” Grettir’s uncle Jökull Bárðarson is a third example (ÍF 7:117): “Jökull was a big strong man, and a very arrogant man; he was a seafarer and very quarrelsome, but a stalwart man for all that.” Gísli Þorsteinsson is also a seaman (ÍF 7:188): “He was a seafarer and came out to Hvítá the summer when Grettir had been in the mountains for a year.” The outlaw Grímr gets a brief but storied mention (ÍF 7:205): “Grímr later became a seafarer, and a great story is told about him.” A reputation for seamanship can even turn into a cognomen, as in the case of Steinn Þorgerðsson’s grandfather, who was called Steinn mjökisglandi (ÍF 7:244) or “Steinn the inveterate sailor.”

Perhaps the best-known merchant in the sagas is Oddr Ófeigsson in *Bandamanna saga*, who makes a great fortune by trading (ÍF 7:297):

He pursues this activity for a time and his situation develops in such a way that he becomes the sole owner of a merchant ship and the greatest part of the cargo. He now engages in trading voyages and becomes a very wealthy man. He is most often in the company of distinguished men and is highly regarded abroad. It gets to the point that he owns two merchant vessels engaged in trading, and it is told that there was no man of equal wealth engaged in trading at that time.

Similar passages, though less elaborate, may be found in *Vatnsdæla saga* (ÍF 8:71, 78, 122), and the cognomen “víðförlri” (widely traveled) is attached to the name of Þorvaldr Koðránsson (ÍF 8:124). His exploits are detailed in two separate stories (ÍF 15:251–100).

The phrasing used in the classical sagas recurs in the texts that are usually regarded as postclassical, for example in “Orms þátrr Stórolfssonar,” where we learn that Ásbjörn prúði Virfilsson was a great traveler (ÍF 13:406): “Ásbjörn grew up now. And as soon as he came of age, he took to voyaging to various lands, and he acquainted himself with the customs of others and was much honored by all chieftains.” In *Króka-Refs saga* (ÍF 14:129) a certain Gellir is described as a “great seafarer” who voyaged between Iceland and Norway, and, finally, in the same saga a man named Bárðr in Haraldr harðráði’s retinue undertakes voyages to Celtic countries and Iceland (ÍF 14:138).

This is only a sample of such passages. They make it clear that trading was an attractive option for able and ambitious young men, an option that could pave the way to fame and fortune. Exactly how many young men availed themselves of the option, and how often, cannot be calculated, but it seems to have been a regular undertaking. When they went abroad, they mingled with foreigners, as in the case of Ásbjörn Virfilsson’s learning new customs, but they did not of course travel alone. They would have had perhaps two dozen shipmates as eager to experience the outside world as they were. They might have stayed in one place, for example Trondheim, but it was just as likely that they separated and acquired different information from different locations. In exceptional cases traders made the passage and returned the same summer, but the usual pattern was for them to overwinter in the country of destination, housed by local citizens or, in limited numbers, at the king’s court. What men in winter quarters could have learned about their host country during a stay of nine or ten months is hard to compass. A crew of twenty or more would have learned a generous multiple of what each individual learned, and what the 300 (360) Icelanders in Trondheim in 1118 or the eighty Norwegians in Snorri’s retinue in 1217 would have known and conveyed to others is well beyond reckoning.

The passage from the prologue to the *Saga of Saint Olaf* quoted above (p. 4) shows us that the news from abroad was refreshed every

summer and that some parts were converted into stories. The passage from *Hungrvaka* that serves as an epigraph to this chapter illustrates just how eagerly the news was received.²⁵ It tells how Magnús Einarsson was elected bishop in 1133 and went abroad in 1134 to be confirmed in Norway. He returned to Eyjafjörður in 1135 and rode to a thingmeeting, causing so much excitement that business was temporarily suspended while Bishop Magnús mounted the pavement in front of the church to deliver the news: “And then the bishop went out onto the pavement in front of the church and told everyone the news of what had happened in Norway while he was abroad, and everyone was much impressed by his eloquence and wisdom.” The bishop would no doubt have elaborated the details subsequently in smaller groups as time went on. As it turned out, this was a crucial moment in Norwegian history and marked the beginning of the period of civil strife that lasted nearly a hundred years. The king with whom Bishop Magnús stayed was Haraldr gilli (1130–36), who was killed the following year. His rival, King Magnús Sigurðarson, had been blinded in the same year as Magnús’s visit in Norway (1135) and was killed by another pretender in 1139. Political news was no doubt prominent in Bishop Magnús’s narrative.

Bulletins from Norway would have been plentiful chiefly because of the regular circulation of trading vessels. As we have seen, the merchants normally spent the winter in Iceland and would have had more than enough leisure to satisfy Icelandic curiosities. The fullest account we have of such a merchant visit is “Pátrr Hrómundar halta,” a little story of ten pages (ÍF 8:305–15) devoted wholly to a merchant visit at Borðeyrr in Hrótafjörður that turned out badly. Indeed, the local people suspect that their visitors are more vikings than merchants and have nothing but pirate goods for sale. As a consequence they decline to engage in trade and prefer to ride to other districts for this purpose, suggesting that enough trading vessels were on hand to provide a choice. The local people are also reluctant to provide lodging, but the merchant (or pirate) captain puts pressure on a certain Þórir Þorkelsson to take them in. Before doing so, Þórir obliges them to take an oath not to cause trouble, the only time we hear of such an oath, and stipulates further that they provide their own provisions and eat in a separate house, thus inhibiting the normal communications that might be expected to thrive in such a situation. The oath does

not prevent the captain from bestowing familiar attentions on Þórir's handsome daughter Helga. When Þórir protests, the captain converts his attentions into a marriage proposal, and Þórir feels compelled to agree.

In the meantime five stallions disappear from the farm of Hrómundr Eyvindarson, and suspicion falls on the traders. Hrómundr confronts them to no avail, but he is able to have them all outlawed at a meeting of the *alþingi*. Fearing the consequences, he fortifies his house, but the traders attack all the same. Though they are beaten off, Hrómundr loses his life in the encounter. The story illustrates in a particularly extreme form what social pressures could bedevil a merchant visit: mutual suspicions, housing difficulties, unwanted contacts with the local women, and even armed confrontation. But there would have been regulated contacts as well.

Hœnsa-Þóris saga tells the story of how a merchant captain named Þór is rejected by the local chieftain but is befriended and taken in for the winter by Hersteinn Blund-Ketilsson. Þór develops such a close relationship with his hosts that when Blund-Ketill is falsely summoned for theft, Þór is outraged and looses an arrow into the crowd of summoners. That arrow becomes the catalyst for all that follows. But personal relationships are variable and other stories about the reception of Norwegian traders are less benign. In *Vatnsdœla saga* (ÍF 8:47–48) Ingimundr Þorsteinsson takes in an irascible trading captain named Hrafn but covets his valuable sword. He therefore lures him into a temple carrying his sword against the prevailing law, then extracts the sword from him as a legal forfeit.

As can well be imagined, a ready source of friction was the quality of the goods offered for trade or the quality of the payment made for them. A sale was often made in the fall and payment collected in the winter or spring. In *Ljósvetninga saga* (ÍF 10:5) a certain Forni in Hagi takes in the Norwegian co-owner of a merchant ship named Sigurðr. Sigurðr sells goods to an unreliable customer named Sölmundr, but in the spring Sölmundr complains about the quality of the goods and refuses to pay. When Sigurðr and his sympathetic host ride out to deliver a legal summons, Sölmundr kills Sigurðr with a spear cast and is subsequently outlawed in perpetuity.

Since the action in *Ljósvetninga saga* takes place in the vicinity of the great trading center in Eyjafjörðr (Gásir), it is perhaps not

surprising that much of the story hinges on trading troubles. A visiting merchant named Helgi Arnsteinsson stays with the great chieftain in Eyjafjörður, Guðmundr ríki (the Powerful), and buys cloaks from a scamp with the name of Þórir Akraskeggr (ÍF 10:21–23). Just as Helgi is about to sail, he discovers that the cloaks are defective and leaves them with Guðmundr as evidence for a prosecution. The prosecution succeeds and Þórir is outlawed. Yet a third case is related in connection with the story of Vöðu-Brandr, who prevails on his father to lodge Norwegian merchants, treats them well, and in return is given passage to Norway (ÍF 10:125–26).

From the same general region as *Ljósvetninga saga* is another two-generational saga, *Reykðæla saga*. It too suggests how differences arose in connection with visiting merchant vessels. In one case two ships arrive in Eyjafjörður, one at Knarrareyrr on the east side of the fjord and one at Gásir on the west side. Steingrímur Þórólfsen arranges to buy lumber from the first, but Vémundr kǫgurr Þórisson is so eager to have the lumber that he deceives the merchant into believing that Steingrímur has decided to purchase lumber from the other ship at Gásir and no longer needs the initial purchase (ÍF 10:172–75). Steingrímur learns of the deception and seizes the best lumber, causing one of the several serious differences that beset his relationship to Vémundr. In this instance no blame is laid at the door of the Norwegian merchants.

In another instance merchants again become the pretext for hostility (ÍF 10:205–11). A ship arrives at Húsavík with the understanding that the Norwegian merchants will be lodged with Glúmr Geirason, but Glúmr is a little delayed in meeting them, allowing a certain Þorbergr höggvinnkinni to make a competitive offer of hospitality, at the same time deprecating Glúmr's resources and willingness to play host. The Norwegians feel committed and hesitate, but finally they agree to the new offer. When Glúmr finally arrives, they are reluctant to renege on the new agreement and decide to stay with Þorbergr. In the meantime Þorbergr plants a mare in Glúmr's barn and lets it be known that the animal has been stolen and that Glúmr is the most likely thief. He forms a search party to uncover the mare and invites the Norwegians to participate, but they are suspicious and decline. The mare predictably turns up exactly where she was planted and facilitates a charge of theft. Þorbergr next assembles a party to

summon the alleged thief, and this time, rather unaccountably, the Norwegians agree to take part. Fighting breaks out, as it often does when summons are delivered, and all the Norwegians are killed.

The competing offers of lodging in this story are interesting because they suggest that housing Norwegian merchants over winter could be advantageous. There is a hint about negotiated terms in a passage we will discuss below, but the most common form of compensation was a very valuable gift at the conclusion of the stay. There may, however, have been other advantages that were less tangible, for example the formation of personal bonds and connections, or even the expectation that the winter guests would also become allies. So much is suggested by the seemingly rash participation of the Norwegian merchants in Þorbergr's feud with Glúmr. Norwegians in Iceland would most often not have had family bonds, but winter quarters may have been one way of integrating them into the social fabric.

Such integration could already have been effected in cases where merchant enterprises were collaborative efforts involving both Icelanders and Norwegians. Thus in *Vápnfirðinga saga* (ÍF 11:28–30) a ship arrives in Vápnafjörður co-captained by the Iclander Þorleifr inn kristni and a Norwegian named Hrafn. Þorleifr returns home and Hrafn is invited to overwinter with Brodd-Helgi Þorgilsson, but Hrafn alleges an incompatibility of temperament and approaches Geitir Lýtingsson instead. On a later social occasion Hrafn is mysteriously killed; Brodd-Helgi and Geitir decide to share his property, but before they can do so, Þorleifr seizes it and returns it to Hrafn's heirs in Norway. This is clearly seen as a scrupulous act, and we can conclude from the incident that on this occasion Þorleifr's business association weighs more heavily than his local connections in Iceland.

More incidental cases of overwintering traders can be found in *Droplaugarsona saga* (ÍF 11:175–76) or in *Njáls saga*. In the latter a ship captain from Vík named Hallvarður hvíti (the White) spends the winter with Gunnarr Hámundarson and constantly urges him to go abroad himself (ÍF 12:74–75). Hallvarður is a very experienced traveler and claims to have visited all the countries between Norway and Russia, including Bjarmaland (Permian, the Kola Peninsula). One can only imagine the canvases that a winter's storytelling would have opened up before Gunnarr's inner eye. He seems at first not to be altogether captivated, but on Njáll's advice he decides after all to seek

fame and fortune. Another rather minor episode finds a Norwegian named Auðólfr under the roof of Gunnarr's antagonist Otkell (ÍF 12:133). Auðólfr takes a fancy to Otkell's daughter and is therefore eager to please his host. This inclination leads him to participate in a hostile encounter with Gunnarr, in which he succumbs (ÍF 12:138). The romantic theme recurs when Flosi and his allies need passage abroad. Flosi knows of a Norwegian merchant from Trondheim who desires the hand of an Icelandic woman but can only obtain her if he agrees to settle in Iceland. Flosi is therefore able to effect an exchange of land for the Norwegian ship. Marriage is perhaps the ultimate form of social integration, and we will appreciate the full extent of that integration in the case of Kári Sǫlmundarson below.

Sturlunga saga does not add greatly to the information on overwintering, but a passage at the beginning of *Guðmundar saga dýra* does suggest an evolution in the practice.²⁶ In the winter of 1184–85 three Norwegian ships are drawn up in Eyjafjörður. Kolbeinn Tumason is the chieftain in Skagafjörður, to the west, and because it is a famine year, he sets a high rate of compensation for overwintering, part of which will be his. This price setting indicates that the informal compensation arrangements described in the Saga-Age texts had been replaced by a more regularized system determined by the chieftains. In this episode the Norwegians find the stipulated rate in Skagafjörður too high and choose to find their lodging farther east. Three of them are taken in by a certain Teitr Guðmundarson, although it is not quite clear whether he is resident in Eyjafjörður or Reykjadalr. In any event Teitr gets on well with his guests and elects to go abroad with them the following summer.

Later in the same saga two groups of Icelanders confront each other at the encampment of a Norwegian ship presumably at Gásir.²⁷ The passage shows that the Norwegians set up camp on land until such time as they find winter quarters. Two of them are taken in by the opposing Icelandic factions. The Norwegians laugh at the high and mighty behavior of the posturing Icelanders, but they appear not to be involved in the hostility. This information on a Norwegian encampment is supplemented by an incidental remark that the chieftain Þorvaldr Snorrason was in a booth at a thingmeeting where Norwegians had made camp.²⁸ We can only assume that Norwegians attended thingmeetings also for commercial purposes.

Commercial dealing continued to provoke quarrels in the Sturlung Age, most notably in the great trade dispute of 1215–20, which fell just short of warfare.²⁹ There would have been lesser collisions as well, as in 1227 in the case of the Norwegian trader Þjóstarr who becomes involved in a disagreement with his Icelandic debtor Bjarni Árnason. Þjóstarr is restrained at first but eventually runs a spear through Bjarni.³⁰ He is also involved in internal hostilities.³¹ Norwegian merchants would have been implicated in Icelandic hostilities in any event because they appear to have been in the arms business. At one point in *Porgils saga skarða* it is mentioned specifically that Eyjólfur Þorsteinsson goes to Gásir to procure weapons from a Norwegian ship.³²

It is not always explicit that a Norwegian guest is an overwintering trader. In these cases we may refer to the individual simply as the household Norwegian. In *Bjarnar saga*, for example, we learn that a Norwegian is in Þórðr Kolbeinsson's company and participates in an attack on his enemy Björn (ÍF 3:179). Why he was there is not explained. At the end of the saga there is a list of the men who participated in the killing of Björn, including a Norwegian (ÍF 3:208). This may or may not be the same Norwegian. If it is, we must imagine a visit of more than a single winter's duration.

Laxdoela saga provides a story of mutual hospitality that does not turn out well (ÍF 5:77–83). Óláfr pái (Peacock) travels to Hǫrðaland and stays with a Norwegian named Geirmundr gnýr. The hospitality is good, but when Geirmundr shows up without warning to accompany Óláfr back to Iceland, Óláfr is reluctant, apparently sensing that no good will come of it. Geirmundr persists and Óláfr accedes, duly offering the Norwegian reciprocal hospitality. Geirmundr promptly takes a liking to Óláfr's daughter Þuríðr, but Óláfr, still sensing trouble, refuses a marriage. Geirmundr once more persists and in effect bribes the girl's mother, who in turn persuades Óláfr. The marriage takes place, but the couple is not compatible and Geirmundr prepares to leave without wife and child. Before he can make good his departure, however, Þuríðr steals his prize sword and refuses to return it. Geirmundr lays a curse on it that foreshadows the tragic high point of the story. This failed connection with a Norwegian is the obverse of the heroic tale of Kári Sǫlmundarson in *Njáls saga*.

Totally undeveloped are the references to Norwegians in the

company of Þorsteinn Ingimundarson in *Vatnsdœla saga* (ÍF 8:73) and Brodd-Helgi Þorgilsson in *Vápnfirðinga saga* (ÍF 11:48). In the first instance the Norwegian is referred to as “his Norwegian.” That may suggest a service relationship rather than a winter guest, but it is hard to know. The case may be clearer in *Njáls saga* (ÍF 12:147) where we learn that Egill Kolsson had “received” or “taken in” two Norwegians named Þórir and Þorgrímr. The verb “receive” or “take in” certainly suggests that they were winter guests, but again we cannot be certain.

In a passage in *Þorgils saga skarða* we saw an indication that weapons were among the merchandise offered for sale by Norwegian traders (note 32). We might speculate further that the manufacture of weapons was more advanced in Norway than in Iceland.³³ The Norwegians would, for example, have had easier access to imports and manufacturing techniques from England, France, and Germany than the Icelanders. Suggestive are the stories in which Þorsteinn Ingimundarson in *Vatnsdœla saga* covets the valuable sword of his Norwegian guest Hrafn (ÍF 8:47–48) and the importance attached to Geirmundr’s fateful sword in *Laxdœla saga* (ÍF 5:77–83). If the Norwegian weapons were considered to be of particularly high quality, it may also be the case that the Norwegians were thought to be particularly adept in their use. It is not just the eighty Norwegians in Snorri Sturluson’s service in 1217 or the almost thirty Norwegians in the following of Ari Þorgeirsson when he returned from campaigning in Norway in 1162, but the frequency with which Norwegians are engaged in internal Icelandic conflicts that suggest a special warrior role (note 22). The heroic dimensions of Kári Sǫlmundarson are of course the example par excellence, and we will return to them, but there is a significant number of more peripheral campaigners.

Peripheral indeed is the moment when, in *Heiðarvíg saga* (ÍF 3:261—Jón Ólafsson’s transcript), a certain Narfi seeks the loan of a special weapon from a relative because he has been challenged to single combat by a Norwegian. The challenge is a mere fiction, but it is devised in such a way as to suggest that one must be well armed to confront a Norwegian. In *Fóstbræðra saga* (ÍF 6:209) two Norwegians are foremost in the final attack on Þorgeirr Hávarsson; both inflict great wounds before succumbing. In *Grettis saga* (ÍF 7:241–43) a young Norwegian arrives by ship while Grettir is isolated

on Drangey. Grettir's antagonist Þorbjörn ǫngull hires him to scale the cliff and attack Grettir because he is a particularly adroit climber. His attack does not succeed, but then, as now, Norwegians were no doubt reputed to be skilled mountaineers. The most celebrated example is Óláfr Tryggvason's rescue of a man frozen with fear on a cliff face in coastal Norway.³⁴ Finally, as in *Fóstbræðra saga*, Norwegians participate in the final confrontation between Helgi Ásbjarnarson and Helgi and Grímr Droplaugarsynir, two on the side of Helgi Ásbjarnarson and one on the other side (ÍF 11:163–65). Norwegians seem to be a regular feature of culminating moments in the sagas.

A case in which the borderline between temporary residence and household obligation is blurred can be found in *Njáls saga*. Gunnarr's antagonist Egill Kolsson takes in two Norwegians named Þórir and Þorgrímr (ÍF 12:147). They are specifically characterized as being "good fighters and brave in every respect." When Egill sets out against Gunnarr with a company of fifteen, he asks the Norwegians to accompany him as well, but they protest that they have no quarrel with Gunnarr, and Þórir ironizes the need for a company of fifteen against only three men.

At this point Egill's wife enters the scene and declares that her daughter Guðrún has shamed herself by sleeping with a man who does not dare to support his "kinsman" (or "in-law"). This raises the question of Þórir's status: is he merely a winter guest or has he become a member of the family? The girl's mother goes on to label him a "ragr maðr" (a cowardly, unnatural man); that is enough to ensure the participation of the Norwegians, although they foresee that they will not return (ÍF 12:154–55). Þórir inflicts a fatal wound on Gunnarr's brother Hjortr at Knafahólar but is immediately killed by Gunnarr (ÍF 12:158–59). Þorgrímr survives for the moment but succumbs at the siege of Gunnarr's house after delivering a famous quip (ÍF 12:187). This sequence is interesting because it illustrates several issues pertinent to visiting Norwegians: it shows that they could be notable warriors, that they could become almost completely integrated, and that they could also suffer the perils of their new domestication.³⁵

Whereas we encounter Norwegians only here and there in the Saga-Age texts, they appear with increasing frequency in *Sturlunga saga*. In *Prestssaga Guðmundar góða* a certain Helgi Skaftason is

killed because he has burned the ship of a Norwegian named Páll (or Brennu-Páll).³⁶ In the same year the Icelandic chieftain Þorvarðr Þorgeirsson is, however, able to extract self-judgment for the killing and earns great repute.³⁷ In 1180 a ship transporting Ingimundr Þorgeirsson and his foster son, the future bishop Guðmundr Arason, set sail for Norway from Gásir and was blown back west by a contrary wind. One day a Norwegian named Ásmundr sounds the alarm, warning that he hears the crash of breakers.³⁸ We can imagine that many if not most of the ships plying the route between Norway and Iceland had mixed crews and passengers. The amount of time available for communication will have depended on weather conditions, but when a replica of the Gokstad Ship sailed from Oslo to America in 1893, Captain Magnus Andersen reported that there was leisure for reading.³⁹ The twelfth-century equivalent would have been talk and storytelling.

When Ingimundr finally reaches Norway, he is plundered by some court retainers. He himself is eager to keep the peace, but his relatives and companions thirst for revenge and are able to kill four of the offenders.⁴⁰ The throne claimant Jón kuflungr finds in favor of the Icelanders. The following year, back in Iceland, a Norwegian kills a certain Snorri á Völlum.⁴¹ Qnundr Þorkelsson shelters the killer and secures passage for him abroad, leading to dire consequences and his own burning in his house. In *Guðmundar saga dýra*, in which that burning is described,⁴² Norwegians sever the hand of a certain Skæringr Hróaldsson, and Guðmundr extracts composition from them.⁴³ In yet another passage from 1212 a Norwegian warns of imminent fighting, but his warning is brushed aside until it is too late.⁴⁴

From 1215 to 1220 there was a sequence of trade disputes between Icelanders and Norwegians leading to the killing of Ormr Jónsson, his son, and others.⁴⁵ In connection with the raid on Sturla Sighvatsson's residence at Sauðafell in 1229 a Norwegian named Eyvindr brattr is mentioned prominently.⁴⁶ He figures again in an attack on men in Kópavík in Arnarfjörðr.⁴⁷ In 1237 another Norwegian is mentioned in the following of Þorleifr Þórðarson.⁴⁸ In 1239 Norwegian merchants are present at an encounter in Hlöðuvík and threaten to intervene, but they are dissuaded.⁴⁹ In *Þórðar saga kakala* at the Battle of Haugsnes in 1246 a Norwegian named Eysteinn hvíti (the White) marshalls the

troops of Brandr Kolbeinsson,⁵⁰ and in *Svínfellinga saga* a Norwegian named Fjárgarðr participates in the hostilities between Sæmundr Ormsson and Ögmundr Helgason in 1250.⁵¹

In most of these instances the mention of Norwegian participation in internal Icelandic disputes is quite incidental. The Norwegian referred to in a given account was sufficiently involved to have his name remembered, but we have no way of telling how close or of what duration the connection was. In only two cases are we somewhat better informed. One is the story of Gunnarr Þiðrandabani, which is told both in “Gunnars þátr Þiðrandabana” (ÍF 11:195–211) and in *Fljótsdæla saga* (ÍF 11:264–88). The action begins with the arrival of two Norwegian merchants in the East Fjords, named Gunnarr and Þormóðr. They are taken in by Ketill þrymr, whose household includes a foster son named Þiðrandi Geitisson, a promising and popular young man. Þiðrandi is by chance in the company of a small group bent on delivering what should have been a peaceable summons against a debtor in Ketill’s household. As the group arrives, a playful skirmish breaks out between the summoners and the debtor. The matter becomes serious when the debtor spurs Ketill to action, and he promptly kills one of the summoners. The Norwegian Gunnarr is in turn incited by a woman in the household and, based on misinformation, he has the misfortune of killing the young man Þiðrandi.

Þiðrandi’s brother Þorkell takes charge of the mission of vengeance for his dead kinsman and, resorting to a ruse, he extracts information on the hideout of the Norwegians. Þorkell and his followers dispatch one of them, Þormóðr, in short order, but Gunnarr escapes and takes refuge with a certain Sveinki Þórisson, who in turn sends him to Helgi Ásbjarnarson, where he spends the winter. During the following summer Gunnarr is outlawed and Helgi Ásbjarnarson is killed. Helgi’s widow Þórdís therefore decides to send Gunnarr west to Helgafell. Here he will be under the protection of Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, who is about to marry her fourth husband Þorkell Eyjólfsson. Þorkell is determined to rid the household of Gunnarr, but Guðrún, with the aid of Snorri the Chieftain, prevails and succeeds in defending her refugee. Eventually she is able to procure passage back to Norway for him, and he sends gifts of gratitude both to her and to his savior in the East, Sveinki Þórisson. He also invites Sveinki, who has now

become vulnerable in Iceland, to join him in Norway. He does so and spends the rest of his life in Norway, where he is generously provided for by Gunnarr.

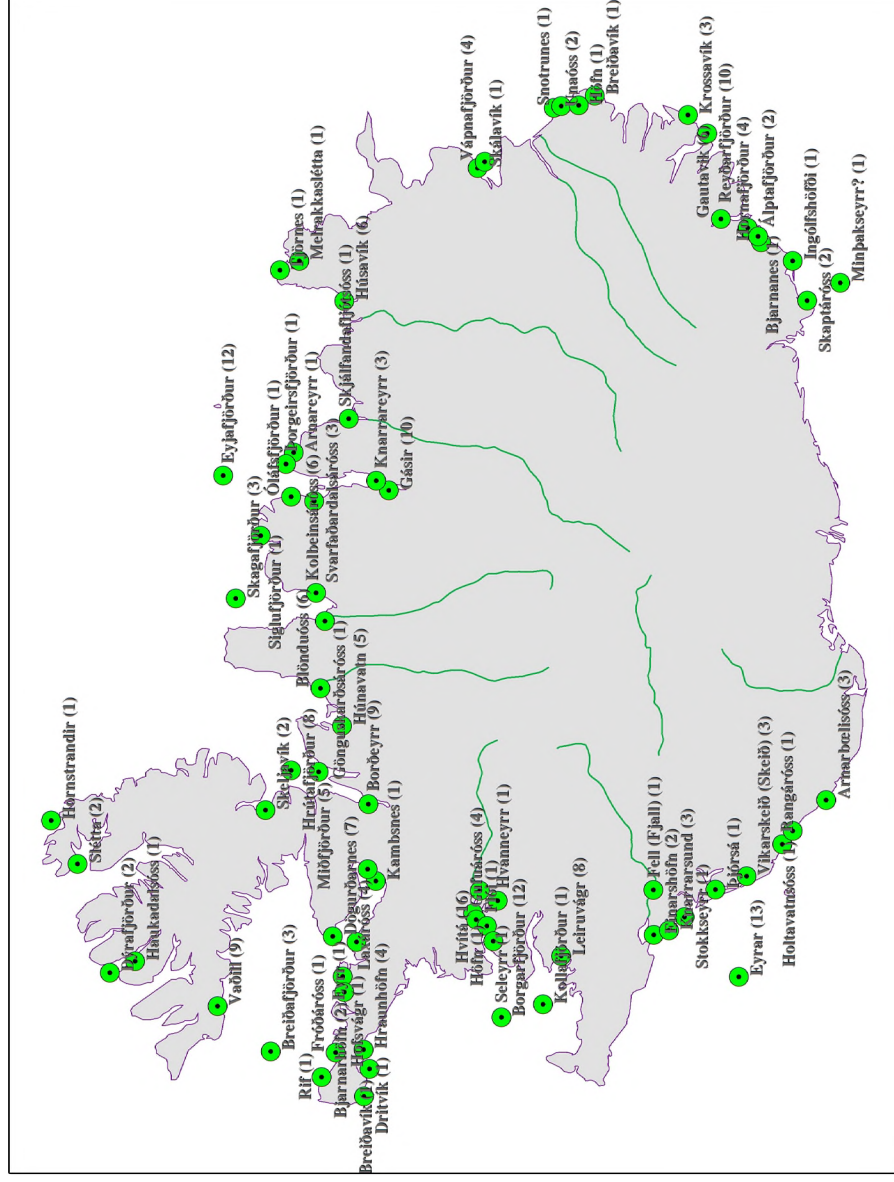
This story recounts more than just a winter's stay for a visiting Norwegian merchant. Gunnarr becomes acquainted with leading figures in both eastern and western Iceland, personages of such stature as Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir and Snorri the Chieftain. His travels familiarize him with many places across the breadth of Iceland, and his experiences give him an uncomfortably close familiarity with Icelandic law and feud practice. These experiences provide us with some sixteen moments of breathless suspense in the surviving story, but the recollection may have provided rather more entertainment in Norway, especially since it could be supplemented by the eyewitness Sveinki Þórisson.

The other extended narrative about a Norwegian is the tale of Kári Sölmundarson in *Njáls saga*. Kári could well have been the central figure in his own saga. He is not a visiting merchant but a warrior errant who is introduced into the story when he gallantly takes the part of Njáll's sons, who have come under attack by seafaring vikings. In turn the brothers Helgi and Grímr join him in a Scottish campaign before they go on to Norway. Here too Kári leaps to their defense in dangerous dealings with Hákon jarl. Their adventures continue in a joint harrying expedition, at the conclusion of which Kári accompanies them to Iceland. He stays the winter, marries Njáll's daughter Helga, and sets up housekeeping at the southern extremity of Iceland at Dyrhólmur. In effect he becomes a naturalized Iclander. He is therefore involved in all the family events pertaining to Njáll, including the final burning of his house, from which Kári is the only known survivor. As such he carries out a bloody revenge and acquires a stature quite comparable to that of Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi (ÍF 12:335).

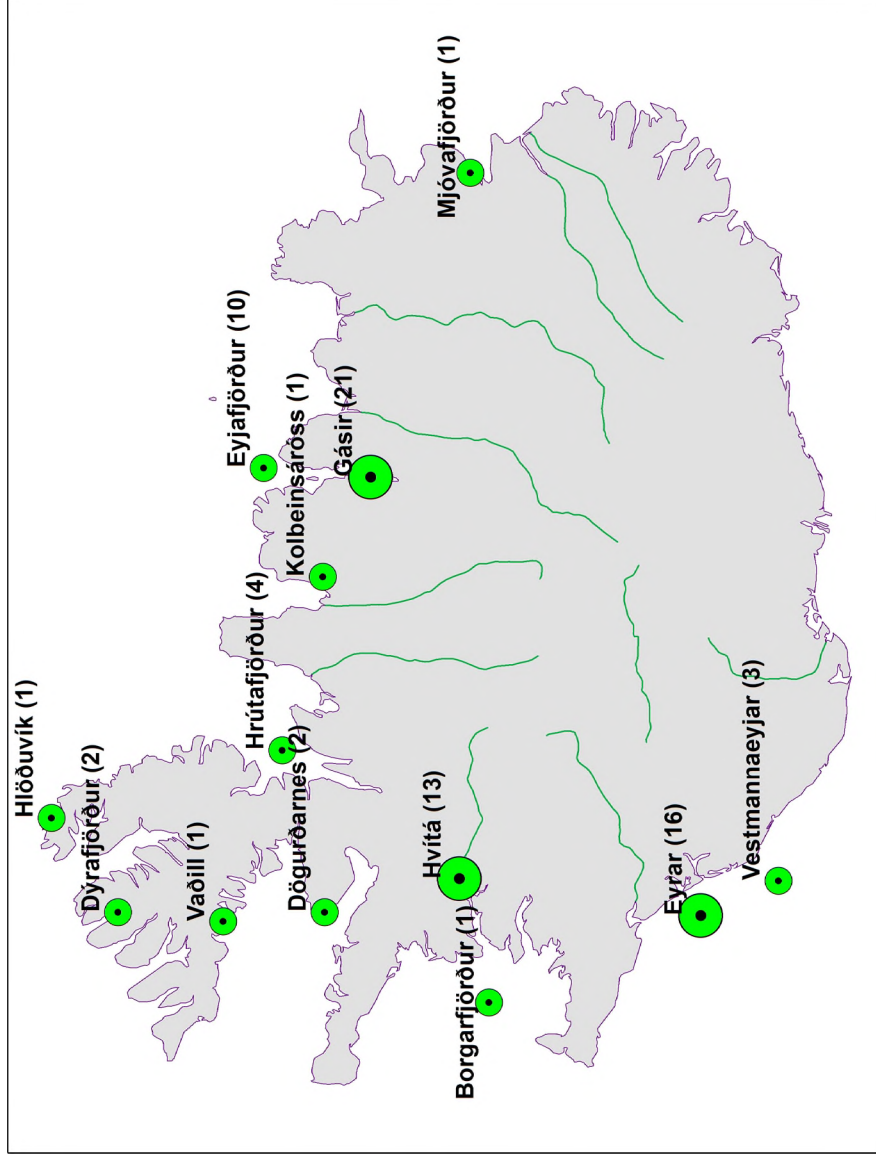
There is some doubt as to whether we should consider Kári as a Norwegian. The *Book of Settlement* (ÍF 1.2:382) tells us that Kári's grandfather Þorbjörn jarlakappi, though Norwegian in origin, sailed from Orkney and settled in Iceland. One of his sons was Sölmundur, Kári's father. When Kári first introduces himself to Njáll's sons, he says only that he is coming from the Hebrides (ÍF 12:204). There is no evidence that he lived in Norway, and the only evidence that he is not

Icelandic is that he is not so categorized and that he appears to have no property in Iceland. Perhaps we should consider him a resident of the North Atlantic. Indeed, though our information is almost exclusively from Icelandic sources, we should perhaps expand our perspective and consider the merchants and raiders taken as a group, especially in the early period, as a North Atlantic community. The circulation of information would have embraced Greenland, the Faroe Islands, Ireland, England, Scotland, and the British islands as well as Norway and Iceland, although Norway figures far more prominently on the Icelandic horizon than any of the other destinations. We must also consider that linguistic affinities would have made the Norse-speaking communities much more accessible to each other than the English- and Celtic-speaking communities.

We can conclude that in the period from the Icelandic settlement down to the thirteenth century there was a constant presence of Icelanders in Norway and Norwegians in Iceland. The interchange would have been considerably more extensive than the sagas suggest because ship arrivals are registered only sporadically. During the summers and the overwinterings in both countries there would have been a free flow of news and information, and the high points would have solidified into story, as the prologue to the *Separate Saga of Saint Olaf* states. There is no process of addition or multiplication that will allow us to quantify the communications, but their availability enabled the Icelanders to write Norwegian history from the days of Sæmundr Sigfússon and Ari Þorgilsson in the early twelfth century down to the great compilations of the early thirteenth century. We must next explore how the Icelanders viewed Norwegian history and in what terms they cast their perceptions.



Map no. 1 of Iceland: Harbors and landing sites in Iceland mentioned in sagas and tales about the Saga Age (ca. 930-1050). See pages 4-5.



Map no. 2 of Iceland: Number and distribution of harbors and landing sites in thirteenth-century Iceland, from evidence in *Sturlunga saga*. See page 5.